

John Chamberlain: The “Fit” of Sculpture

Jonathan Goodman

John Chamberlain, an authentic American hero and major sculptor, died last year. Born in 1927, the artist produced some of the most interesting and satisfying three-dimensional work of his generation, spanning nearly a sixty-year career that was outspoken, daring, and powerful from the start. Unlike David Smith, his great predecessor born some twenty years before him, Chamberlain did not remain wedded to a fixed vocabulary or turn out hard-edged abstractions that refused to mesh with the messy aggregates of abstract-expressionist painting. Instead, as the title “Choices” of his major second retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum in New York (the first came in 1971) points out, Chamberlain’s additive style is composed of many choices, some of which reflect a painting palette of de Kooning (painting and a brilliant color choice for Chamberlain’s sculptures are more important than we might think). Indeed, such choices are the basis for what the artist calls the “fit” of sculpture, a series of decisions that place the myriad pieces of crushed and bent automobile parts he weaves together in a highly lyrical and also inescapably erotic manner. The forms thus “fit” together. Fitting is also part of erotic involvement, which has to do with choice, the decisions he makes to make sure the parts cohere in relation to each other.

These parts are more than crumpled metal components. Chamberlain quite deliberately explores sexuality, in particular the contours and crevices of the female body, in many of his works. Fitting is an active verb that sums up the union that occurs in sex, a subject that Chamberlain often refers to. So fitting is both a literal term and a metaphor for the imaginative possibilities of the object, which is complex and intuitive as opposed to being simple and rational. It is important, in the case of Chamberlain, not to be afraid to merge opposing points of view; his contradictions are usually much more interesting than the successful decisions of lesser artists. Indeed, his esthetic choices possess the quiet certitude of a foregone conclusion—as if Chamberlain had fine tuned his sense of fit to the highest degree. More than most of us, Chamberlain was completely his own man: he left school in the ninth grade and learned to fly a plane at the age of eleven! Such actual, as opposed to rhetorical, romanticism made it clear that he belonged to the American moment in the 1950s and ‘60s, the time when American culture was clearly in the forefront of many wonderful inventions, spurred by both reason and intuition.

One of the most powerful notions of Chamberlain’s art may be found in its relation to painting. Chamberlain painted abstractions himself, but it is in the twisted and cut metal sculptures that he produced during most of his career that his palette is best discerned. Critics and curators have often compared Chamberlain with de Kooning, and there is a marked similarity in the inspired anarchy of the work of both. But where de Kooning

was, during the course of his career, trying to unlearn the surface technical sophistication he picked up in night school in Holland, Chamber presented a pure, declarative, and more than slightly anarchic force on the spot. Amazingly, it was formal and sexual to an equal degree, eroticism being the overall metaphor for sculpture that looked at painting closely but maintained its three-dimensionality. The car parts were carefully put together in ways that required viewers to walk full circle around the sculptures—one is reminded, in a general way, of the group sculpture by Rodin called *Burghers of Calais*, which also necessitated a circular approach to be understood. But the car parts' colors tended to join disparate, even opposing forms together in ways that make the sculptures feel about as painterly as a sculpture can be. This is not to say that Chamberlain's strengths were that of a painter especially; always, he was most interested in the fit of volumetric components. Yet the care with which he used color shows him to be an eager student of color, someone for whom differing hues had the ability to make his art cohere. Indeed, he would go on to be touted as a major American colorist of the twentieth century.

It is worthwhile at this point to consider for a bit the American moment in art and its movement as well as influence on other art cultures. The American moment came in the middle third of the twentieth century, at a time when the School of Paris had become more or less moribund and the can-do mentality and confidence of the American abstract expressionists (and beyond into proto-Pop and actual Pop art) were leading the way. The mid- to late 1940s and early to mid-1950s were very exciting times to be in New York, and some great art came out of the period. Additionally, writers have seen the entire twentieth century as a triumph of American values, finding in the freedoms taken by Pollock, Gorky, and de Kooning a justification of the jazzy notion of independence and self-taught, anti-academic values. The time prized the notion of a raw and expressive joy, although tragedy—alcoholism and even suicide—followed many of the artists, most of whom did not know where they were going artistically until they realized, suddenly, that they were there, among the the inspired spaces and colorful abstractions of abstract expressionism.

Now it cannot be said that New York in the 1940s and early '50s, its highest point in terms of art, had a stacked set of cards. Instead, people like Jackson Pollock, a painting activist who was responsible for the all-powerful drip in paintings, and Chamberlain, a true American rogue artist from Indiana, were democratizing the idiom of art. This means that while they could not compete with the brilliant painters and sculptors of Paris, they could change the vernacular of painting and sculpture and therefore the entire game. Born in 1927, the young Chamberlain belonged to the several years during which America was the most creative place to paint on earth, and even though the abstract-expressionist movement was mostly painters, people like him were able to reinterpret its insights in volumetric form. This is the strength—indeed the greatness—of Chamberlain's legacy; it concerns a no-barriers esthetic that refuses to look back. But it is important to see that time as historical rather than current, something that many New York artists, critics, curators, and historians fail to do. It is of course enticing—and patriotic—to celebrate an

American sensibility that turned both concrete and complete in New York, at a time when many European artists were still struggling with the last-stage influences of continental painting. But we must recognize that moment as being over, no matter how accomplished its history may be. Chamberlain is a truly original sculptor, but the kind of formalism he produced is of its time. And New York's art historical chauvinism is distasteful as an esthetic.

The prevailing metaphor Chamberlain's painted, crumpled surfaces enact is highly sexual. In keeping with a proper "fit," the artist has chosen parts that merge with each other with a particular passion or violence. Additionally, the compressed components open up and close down almost ceaselessly, so that thin crevasses and wide flanks play upon each other's existence. This results in a remarkable range of effects, which are abstract but nonetheless may be seen in certain ways as effectively mimetic. The erotic play continues in Chamberlain's titles, which are chosen from a personal lexicon of individual words and can range from the bizarre to the humorous to the genuinely comic—for example, his powerful, painted and chromium steel work *Dooms Day Flotilla* (1982), which consists of seven boatlike sculptures that rest on the floor; or *Cone Yak* (1990), a pun on the French town of Cognac, where the liquor is made. While these word plays are humorous and often truly poetic—we remember that the artist spent time in 1955 at the influential progressive school Black Mountain College, where he became friends with poets Robert Creeley and Charles Olson—they usually bear scant resemblance to the sculptures they refer to. Still, the titles show Chamberlain's love of puns and even the way the words look.

Indeed, the *physical* appearance of English words played a large role in Chamberlain's choice of titles. At Black Mountain, Chamberlain had read Ernest Fenollosa's treatise on the visual nature of Chinese characters, entitled "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry." This would convince him of the visual character of certain English words, which would often end up as part of his titles. The absurdity of many of the names of his sculptures remains part of their ongoing appeal, which willfully breaks boundaries of sense, and sometimes, propriety. There is a remarkable energy and inventiveness in Chamberlain's art, which, like de Kooning's paintings, investigates the innate properties of the artist's materials. And the sexual aspect is hardly an afterthought; instead, it is the dominant trope associated with Chamberlain's creativity. His larger than life personality and grand manner places us back in the heyday of the abstract expressionists, most of whom were men whose attitude was provocative and macho. Chamberlain fit, to use his favorite word again, into the milieu with an abundant brilliance that makes it hard to separate him from the painters, who mostly made up the New York School. It goes, almost without saying, that the American moment was made for a person like Chamberlain, whose grand, phallic crashes of sculptures resulted in art of extraordinary vividness and force.

Interestingly, Chamberlain never lost his creativity, making strong work up until his death. *Sphinxgrin Two* (1986/2010) consists of several columns of aluminum twisted around each other. Attaining a height of 18 feet, the sculpture observes the myriad creases and folds of crushed foil, and possesses a marvelously physical presence and weight in a massive but whimsical structure. It is based on a comparatively tiny maquette from 1986. Similarly, *Rosetuxedo Two* (1986/2009) is a giant knot of a three-dimensional work, consisting of columns of colored (rose) aluminum that are also based on a small maquette from the same year. In the very beginning of his career, viewers saw *Calliope* (1954), a steel sculpture consisting of elegant curving tendrils extending from a central steel vertical. The work, clearly in debt to the steel works of Smith and Richard Stankiewicz, also possesses an active energy, engaged and engaging in its composition, although the notion of crushed forms does not really come up until 1958, when Chamberlain made *Shortstop*, a massive, complex work of painted and chromium-plated steel and iron. Here one begins to see the bent and crumpled forms, albeit only of one color. A year later, in works like *Manitou* and *Zaar*, the sculptures start to consist of colored and painted steel, opening up Chamberlain's painterly vocabulary, which would become as developed as the crushed forms the paint adhered to.

We have spoken of Chamberlain's close relationship to abstract expressionism; however, he also can be seen as a Pop artist of considerable means. The painted steel of car parts remain transformed by their elevation into the fit of Chamberlain's art, but they also are recognizable as car parts, pointing the way to the audience's conscious awareness of manufactured materials. So the glamor of the American car industry isn't lost; in fact, it is part of the reach of Chamberlain's art, which was not consciously or utterly Pop but which included Pop components as part of its appeal. One of the strengths of Chamberlain's major works—I am speaking almost entirely of the crushed car-part assemblages of his mid-career, beginning in the middle 1960s—is their ability to reflect influences and maintain their independent status at the same time. Crushing and folding are central to the artist's esthetic, which of course can refer to the industrial origins of the cars themselves. Chamberlain never loses sight of the components' original lives as car parts, and this adds to the generally macho allure of their final lives in the making of his sculptures. It is often forgotten that Chamberlain also put other steel fabrications, like refrigerators, into his work—being an assembler of astonishing ability, the artist was capable of working with almost anything that fell in to his hands.

In his catalogue essay, critic Dave Hickey refers to the commercial origins of both de Kooning's and Chamberlain's palette, which in the latter's case was heavily influenced by the painted car parts he chose to use (Chamberlain himself would paint the steel as well). This brought Chamberlain's work ever closer to painting, although the point may be belabored—first and foremost, his art is volumetric and three dimensional, even when the colors are handled so that they have a nearly structural interest. As Chamberlain liked to point out, the pieces of his work are not found but rather chosen, a turn of phrase that emphasizes the active responsibility he took in the making of a piece of art. Combining

choice and fit results in work whose sense of rightness would be intuitive rather than reasoned, allowing Chamberlain to see his surfaces as belonging to the same line of industrially based ties as the overall gestalt of the individual parts themselves. The colors of his sculptures are in many ways grand, but they always return to their place of origin: as commercially painted pieces of steel. Even the all-white 1962 sculpture *Velvet White*, consisting of painted and chromium-plated steel, shows us what we might call a “decorated” surface, which undermines, to some extent, the extent of industrialization the crumpled shape adheres to.

Chamberlain’s work predates minimalism roughly by a decade, but it does not set a precedent for people like Donald Judd and Richard Serra, artists of a high order who saw in simplicity and serial repetition a counterstrike against modernism, which by the 1960s had lost much of its ground. Unlike the minimalists, Chamberlain set up an esthetic of baroque extravagance, which in many ways presented an antithesis to the puritanical symmetries of those who followed him. This of course fits into the grandeur of his personality, which hinged on a larger-than-life statement that equaled the grand gestures of his art. But we are wise if we do not make too much of Chamberlain’s eccentricity—as charming as this attribute may be, it does not explain the achievement of his art. His prodigal nature can align with the rococo intricacies of what he made, but personality and work are not the same thing. This demand to make them both cohere in a unified way is a basic American mistake; our search for an always personal reading of the artist, especially an idiosyncratic one like Chamberlain, misleads his audience into participating in the realm of gossip, which has no real basis to stand on. At the same time, it can be generally observed that Chamberlain’s heyday meshed with the wild and wooly Sixties; and that he belonged throughout his career to the imaginative spaces of that raucous period.

What we can speak of and assert is the way Chamberlain made art, turning twisted pieces of iron and steel in a true vernacular. This is a far cry from gentility, but of course something else happens: energy is compressed so that it slowly molders in the finished pieces. The folds and slotted openings are both poetic and, as we have commented, deeply erotic. The nearly seven-foot height of *The Hot Lady from Bristol* (1979) owes a lot of its force to the semi-figurative cast of the sculpture, which seems to be structured on long legs made of yellow steel. The sculptures of Chamberlain straddle pure abstraction and recognizable figuration, with an emphasis on abstraction, I believe. Part of his achievement lies in the way the sculptures switch codes and deliver form as a continually changing perception; one of the major pleasures of seeing Chamberlain’s work is the complete alterations in form and color that occur as the viewer makes his way around the sculpture. Indeed, this is a usual requirement for his art, which expresses itself most often as a shape lacking a front or back. Verticality, though, is often a major organizational motif—hence both Chamberlain’s link to sculptural traditions and the phallic presence many writers have commented on. One remembers with his work that art

is a form of play, without which the art often degrades into a purely political perception as an animating force.

But politics are better handled with words than with art because it substitutes public morality for private joy. Chamberlain clearly speaks to the latter, which animates his efforts in a medium whose beginnings belong to memory, the memorial. His work has little to do, however, with the concept of death; it is life affirming in a profound way. And we experience the work in this manner because we find much of it comic, its humor being the wherewithal for a bias toward the unknown, randomly occurring events that make up most people's experience. We also find it in the sheer exuberance of Chamberlain's imagination—in his willingness to explore different forms, surfaces, and materials. And then there is the variousness of his output. Two bodies of work, not as well known as the corpus of steel and iron pieces, stand out: the sculptures made of mineral-coated polymer resin; and the urethane foam sculptures, tied into highly original shapes by simple cord. Two of the resin pieces are from 1970: *Luna, Luna, Luna (In Memory of Elaine Chamberlain)* and *Hano*. Both consist of translucent shapes, like Plexiglas, and are colored by minerals. The creased shapes are similar to the steel sculptures in the sense that they have been bent (by heat, in the case of the resin forms) and manipulated into shapes of undulating complexity. Highly interesting and, in their use of resin, very experimental, the works defy our sense of rightness in regard to hard or dense materials, but of course that makes them that much more interesting.

The urethane foam pieces from the mid-1960s up to 1970 are now a dirty yellow, yet their forms are quite remarkable, still held together by cord, which cuts into their softness almost like a knife. *Mannabend Ra* (1966), a circular piece with its middle cinched by twine, has the marvelous presence of a truly innovative form, something outside the usual history of modern and contemporary sculpture. Highly tactile, the work's funky material retains a raw humor that remains alive to this day, despite the grime of decades. This work, like the resin pieces, show us that Chamberlain has consistently confronted the physicality of his medium, pouring into his conception and facture a willingness to research the nature of his materials and their influence on the boundaries of what can be made. *Stuffed Dog 6* (1970), quite a bit smaller than *Mannabend Ra*, still operates according to Chamberlain's sculptural principles. In this work, the pieces of urethane foam are painted, adding complexity to the color of the medium. Additionally, some of the artist's fondness for slits and sharp breaks in form is maintained. Nor is Chamberlain distant from art historical sources: We remember at this point Susan Davidson's catalog essay, which placed on facing pages a 1969 Chamberlain sculpture, composed of watercolor and resin on paper, and a drawing of drapery by Leonardo da Vinci, dating roughly to 1500; the two pieces look remarkably similar.

The groups of resin and urethane-foam sculptures described above give us a real sense of Chamberlain's iconic restlessness: new forms and materials remain central to his interest in developing a language that would extend the imaginative boundaries of three-

dimensional art. This is not an easy thing to accomplish; as we know, there is something of a mystery to both Smith's and Chamberlain's art, which seems to have sprung up fully formed, coming out, it seems, of nowhere. These men were avant-garde movements all by themselves; their originality meant that sculpture would fare forward, toward new expressiveness that had little precedence in an art historical sense. This is, I think, part of the American moment, when energy and invention, often mixed with idiosyncrasy and questionable behavior, made for a brave new world of form. We can only appreciate from a distance the pressures and achievements of Chamberlain, whose creativity is almost unmatched and who, surprisingly given the life stories of other artists, maintained his creativity to the very end of his life. Legend rises up around such a figure as Chamberlain, giving him a certain fierceness but also allowing him the freedom to experiment in whatever way he wanted. It seems to me inevitable that his interest in crushed and crumpled form would find its apogee in the work of the 1950s and '60s, a time of cultural upheaval and political change in America.

So the dionysian aspect of Chamberlain's oeuvre makes it clear that he preferred an esthetic and morality that belonged to the moment in the tiny duration of its becoming. The reader is thus reminded of de Kooning's 1960 announcement: "Content is a glimpse." Of what exactly, the painter did not specify. But one can speculate that he meant something along the lines of the intuition of a creative idea, which has the quality of inspired insight. And it makes sense that de Kooning characterized this insight as a "glimpse" of something, making certain that the vocabulary remained in the realm of seeing. Its details result in forms that come close to the unbelievable, in the sense that they resolve tensions and oppositions that many would have thought unresolvable. *Mr. Moto* (1963) shows us a red, crumpled metal on top of bent, yellow steel; it engages us through color and through a highly developed sense of compressed form. The bright colors make the sculpture a toy of sorts, calling us to attention in the way a gaudy top might fascinate a child. Some of Chamberlain's exuberance is nicely transformed here, in a way that calls attention to sculpture's great advantage as an art: its ability *not* to fool the viewer with perspective, being nothing but the thing itself. *Miss Remember Ford* (1964), with its curling sheaths painted yellow, black, and green, looks almost like an architectural model but at the same time preserves the sheer pleasure Chamberlain took in the manufacture of his pieces.

Chamberlain often moved between the West Coast and East Coast, maintaining studios on both sides of the country. In 1964, he ventured west and ended up in New Mexico, where the artist Billy Al Bengston introduced him to the skills of airbrushing. Chamberlain would go on to spray car lacquer and metal flake in paintings; this period shows that two-dimensional expression was, while secondary to sculpture, never very far from the artist's mind. The diamond-shaped paintings *Kinks* and *Lovin' Spoonful*, both from 1965 and named after famous rock groups, both show Chamberlain's sensitivity to surface: the former consists of a dark flecked background, in which nine smaller blue diamond-shaped forms, also arranged in groups as diamond shapes, are echoed by a

darker color; while the latter comprises a yellow flecked background with smaller green diamonds, again arranged in a diamond pattern overall. Works such as these communicate to Chamberlain's audience the feeling he had for exploring new materials and ideas. Adventuring took him places where influences might change his art, but the important part is his freedom, his love of the new. Interestingly, as time continued, Chamberlain sought out languages that he had established decades earlier; his vernacular never really changed. As a result, he was able to approximate the same high level in his last works, which continue his search for a form adequate to the far-and-wide extent of his imagination.

It is thus not terribly surprising that Chamberlain's quest for an innovative sculptural idiom would consist into the last and latest part of his life and career. His late style is remarkable for both its upheaval of the crumpled pieces and for its emphasis on Chamberlain own tradition, established over decades of creativity—in so accomplished an artist, it is fair to justify opposing tendencies in his art. *Peaude-soi-emusic* (2011), made the year that Chamberlain died, is a classic example of what had become more or less a classic style; made of bent and crumpled part of blue steel, with bits of yellow and silver metal incorporated into the overall gestalt of the piece, *Peaude-soi-emusic* stands in distinct continuity with art that Chamberlain had made many years before. It shows him to be, if not quite at the top of his powers, continuing to thrive in a medium not easily pursued by an older man. And the large versions of *Sphinxgrin Two* and *Rosetuxedo Two* show us that the artist was still experimenting with whimsical but compelling forms late in his long life. The interest we take in this point of Chamberlain's career does not really relate to issues of final creativity because the work is as youthful as ever. He gives us ways of absorbing the lessons he himself learned as a sculptor traveling from the West Coast to the East Coast and back, from Shelter Island, New York, to Sarasota, Florida. In the close-to-perfect democracy of his making, his art remains accessible to anyone interested in both form and pleasurable experience.

But, finally, fun does live up to Chamberlain's achievements; it can describe a part of his creativity (but only a part). The real accomplishment has to do with his ability to transform detritus into amazing contemporary treatises on form. *Hawkfliesagain* (2010) is a blunt sculpture of white steel pitched vertically, on top of which we find yellow horizontal strips of steel; one of the deliberate discrepancies in Chamberlain's art is the difference his audience experiences between the title and the work itself, and in actuality, we don't learn much about the nature of the work *Hawkfliesagain* from its lyrical name. Yet both sculpture and title are composed with an esthetic sense of appropriateness, and both remain long in our memory. While not truly a poet, Chamberlain nonetheless loved the medium and would shuffle cards with individual words on them to produce his often odd-sounding but usually memorable titles. This interest in literature and chance shows just how broad the range of interests Chamberlain had, although he possessed the good sense to concentrate on what he knew best. In a way, his pursuit of an anti-formal esthetic resulted in masses of metal with real three-dimensional clout, serving as markers on a

path of striking creativity. American culture today keeps returning to artists such as Chamberlin, who can keep the country's mythic spirit of rebellion and individual insight alive. Even so, it can be argued that this moment has lost its core among artists today. We can be glad, then, that we have the work and the very recent memory of Chamberlain, who almost always can be seen as playing at the top of his game.

(Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York: February 24-May 13, 2012; Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, Spain: March-September 2013)